

Testimony to Committee on House Administration
Re: Oversight of the Smithsonian Institution: Opportunities for Growth by Honoring Latino Americans and Asian Pacific Americans
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Every year I begin the semester by asking my students, “What do you know about Asian Pacific American history? What have you been taught?”

The most frequent answer is, “nothing.” When pressed, they will usually recall that “the Chinese built the railroad” and “Japanese internment was a tragic mistake.” Most of the time they learned these things thanks to a few paragraphs in their high school textbook. Whether they come from Texas, Virginia, New Jersey, or even California, their K-12 education is practically devoid of the history and culture of Asian Pacific Americans.

Think back to your own education. What did you learn in school?

According to research, the lack of knowledge I observe in my classroom is due to lack of exposure. Studies of U.S. history and government textbooks show a startling dearth of content on Asian Pacific Americans.¹ In the National Register of Historic Places, only 3% of the sites are associated with their history.² And history is not the only area of neglect. A 2019 study of major U.S. art museums found that Asian Americans represent only .06% of showcased artists.³

¹ Yonghee Suh, Sohyun An, Danielle Forest, “Immigration, Imagined Communities, and Collective Memories of Asian American Experiences: A Content Analysis of Asian American Experiences in Virginia U.S. History Textbooks,” *Journal of Social Studies Research* 39 (2015): 39-51; S. Chan, “The Changing Contours of Asian-American Historiography,” *Rethinking History* 11, no. 1 (2007): 125-147; Okiyoshi Takeda, “A Forgotten Minority? A Content Analysis of Asian Pacific Americans in Introductory American Government Textbooks,” *Political Science and Politics* 48, no. 3 (July 2015): 430-439.

² Michelle Magalong, “Finding a Path Forward: Asian American/Pacific Islander National Historic Landmarks Theme Study,” *Journal of American History* 106, no. 1 (2019): 134-138.

³ Chad M. Topaz, Bernhard Klingenberg, Daniel Turek, Brianna Heggeseth, Pamela E. Harris, Julie C. Blackwood, C. Ondine Chavoya, Steven Nelson, Kevin M. Murphy, “Diversity of Artists in Major U.S. Museums,” *PLoS One* 14, no. 3 (2019): e0212852, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212852>.

There is nothing natural about this omission. Asians and Pacific Islanders are the fastest growing racial group in America today⁴, and their history in this country stretches back centuries. The first Chinese immigrants came to America in the 1820s, and their numbers rapidly increased with the 1849 gold rush in California. Chinese workers blasted tunnels through the Sierra Mountains for the transcontinental railroad, drained swamp lands to make way for agriculture, and felled the trees needed to construct towns and cities. They were joined by Japanese, Korean, and Sikh immigrants, who labored on the fields and in the factories of the American West.⁵

As Asian immigrants remade America's landscape and built America's infrastructure, they also reshaped the legal foundations of the nation. They brought landmark cases to the Supreme Court, including *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886) and *U.S. v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898), which helped to define core concepts of citizenship and equal protection.⁶

Asian Pacific Americans helped to build America, but we must also remember that America built this community by its actions in the world. American imperialism in the Spanish-American War brought Filipinos, Native Hawaiians, Guamanians, and Samoans into the nation's fold. American militarism during the Cold War produced Korean immigrants and waves of Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, and Hmong refugees.⁷

It is not an accident that Asian Pacific American contributions to the nation have often been overlooked or forgotten. Xenophobia and racial discrimination made life difficult for Asian immigrants and led to the erasure of their history. From 1790 until the mid-20th century, naturalization laws prohibited Asian immigrants from becoming U.S. citizens due solely to their

⁴ Elizabeth M. Hoeffel, Sonya Rastogi, Myoung Ouk Kim, and Hasan Shahid, "The Asian Population: 2010," *2010 Census Briefs*, U.S. Department of Commerce, March 2012.

⁵ Gordon H. Chang, *Ghosts of Gold Mountain: The Epic Story of the Chinese Who Built the Transcontinental Railroad* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019); Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016).

⁶ *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 118 U.S. 356 (1886); *United States v. Wong Kim Ark*, 169 U.S. 649 (1898).

⁷ Lee, *Making of Asian America*; Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898-1946* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

race. Congress passed a series of immigration laws that singled out Asian immigrants for exclusion for more than sixty years. At the same time, Asian Pacific Americans faced discrimination in all spheres of life, including leisure, housing, health, labor, education, and marriage.⁸

If we fail to include Asian Pacific Americans in our historical memory, we emerge with a distorted understanding of our nation. If you ignore the history of Chinese exclusion, you can imagine that America once welcomed “the huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” If you dismiss the Philippines and Pacific Islands, you can pretend that America was never an empire. If you omit Japanese Confinement during World War II, you can forget how quickly wartime hysteria can undermine our constitutional principles. If you fail to notice Southeast Asian refugees, you can turn a blind eye to the traumatic legacies of American wars.

If we want to understand the transformation of American politics, we need to remember women like Representative Patsy Mink, the first woman of color to serve in Congress, and Grace Lee Boggs, a self-described “revolutionary” who empowered the youth of Detroit. If we want to recognize the richness of American culture, we need to talk about Asian Pacific American food, music, architecture, art, and literature.

The alternative is to allow the current marginalization of Asian Pacific America history and culture to persist. The trouble is absence itself holds meaning. It teaches lessons about America that are not the kind we want to teach. I see it in my classroom. When my students arrive at college, they have already learned to see Asian Pacific Americans as outsiders to American history, as marginal in American society.

People go to the Smithsonian to learn about America, who we are as a people and a nation. Our national museums capture the stories we tell about ourselves, our past and our future. By creating

⁸ Charles J. McClain, *In Search of Equality: The Chinese Struggle against Discrimination in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Beth Lew-Williams, *The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2018).

an Asian Pacific American Smithsonian, Congress could recognize a historically marginalized group and bring them closer to their rightful role in American society and American memory. This would convey a powerful vision of inclusion, diversity, and equality.

Please take the first step to make this vision a reality. Please form a commission to consider a National Museum of Asian Pacific American History and Culture. I urge you to support Bill H.R.4132.